DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 475 582 SO 034 790

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TITLE	Fostering Democratic Discussions in the Classroom: An Examination of Tensions in Civic Education, Contemporary Schools, and Teacher Education.
PUB DATE	2003-00-00
NOTE	21p.; Paper presented at the Conference of the Education in Democracy for Social Studies Teachers: An Institute for Florida Teacher Educators (Gainesville, FL, April 10-12, 2003).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Citizenship; *Citizenship Education; *Democracy; *Discussion (Teaching Technique); Educational Research; Elementary Secondary Education; *Public Schools; Social Studies; Teacher Education

ABSTRACT

The rationale for public schools has been divergently articulated around various broad themes integrated with a democratic society: economic production, socialization, integration, stability, and equality. Though divergent with regard to purpose and function of schools, advocates of these different purposes generally agree on a civic purpose of schools, or more specifically, the democratic orientation therein, at least in the abstract. Despite this apparent consensus about the purpose of school, education for democracy remains more assertion than actuality. This paper explores a series of tensions that seem to undermine the efforts of teacher educators in moving from the sloganeering associated with civics into the engaged, meaningful, and educative processes of real classrooms. The role of deliberation and discussion in these civics classrooms are highlighted in the paper as one aspect of thoughtful civics pedagogy in a democracy. Through examination of these illustrative tensions embedded in discussions in civic education classrooms, the paper seeks to uncover and further problematize that which seems so agreeable; that schools should be places where democratic civics is enacted. Tensions the paper explores related to democratic schools are illustrative of some of the deep frictions that exist in U.S. society, ones that often remain implicit and underexamined. Tensions briefly examined in the paper include: content and process, objectivism and relativism, and national and global. (Contains 21 references and 4 figures.) (BT)

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Fostering Democratic Discussions in the Classroom: An examination of tensions in civic education, contemporary schools, and teacher education

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University of Central Florida

Education in democracy for social studies teachers:

An institute for Florida teacher educators

Sponsored by

The Florida Law Related Education Association, Inc.

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University of Florida

April 10-12, 2003

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The enterprise of public schools remains a remarkably challenging and complex endeavor. One of the most significant challenges that this socially embedded institution faces is its democratic and civic purposes. Education for democracy is a hallmark of the public school system dating back to its establishment in the period of Reconstruction and through the myriad social changes in the past 150 years. The rationale for public schools has been divergently articulated around various broad themes integrated with a democratic society: economic production, socialization, integration, stability and equality. Though divergent with regard to purpose and function of schools, advocates of these different purposes generally agree on a civic purpose of schools, or more specifically, the democratic orientation therein, at least in the abstract.

Despite this apparent consensus about the purpose of school, education for democracy remains more assertion than actuality. Why? We explore a series of tensions in this paper that seem to undermine our efforts as teacher educators of moving from the sloganeering associated with civics into the engaged, meaningful, and educative processes of real classrooms. The role of deliberation and discussion in these civics classrooms will be highlighted as one aspect of thoughtful civics pedagogy in a democracy.

Through our examination of these illustrative tensions embedded in discussions in civic education classrooms, we seek to uncover and further problematize that which seems so agreeable; that schools should be places where democratic civics is enacted. We agree with the spirit of this assumption, but also believe that without a thorough reexamination of these issues, we are bound to see more slogans than civics. We also

note that there are significant dangers in encouraging teachers to lead thoughtful discussions around important public issues, and equally troublesome outcomes when teachers avoid these issues with the notion that they are somehow embracing a value free pedagogy. Once we have begun this examination, we can begin to reconsider what teachers and teacher educators might do to bridge the gap between rhetoric and reality, and thoughtfully embrace the rich and messy realm of facilitation of thoughtful deliberation and discourse in civics classroom. So we pursue a phenomenological approach. As we proceed, we cast doubts on our own assertions and interrogate our claims, for to continue otherwise is to promote a hegemony of perspective that serves no one and is itself antithetical to the ethos of democracy.

Tensions that we explore related to democratic schools are illustrative of some of the deep frictions that exist in our society, ones that often remain implicit and under-examined. The tensions we briefly examine include:

- content and process
- objectivism and relativism
- national and global.

Our selection of these tensions is based largely on what we believe have explanatory value in understanding the gap between assertion and action, slogan and substance in the evolving democratic mission of schooling.

Before beginning with our theoretical analysis, we pause briefly to make four important observations that fundamentally complicate our enterprise. First, democracy is an essentially contested concept (Gallie, 1964). "Democracy is not a thing, a process, or an idea. It is a word, and a word that has had a checkered career at that" (Postman, 2001,

p. 3). Teacher educators should help teachers get beyond slogans and understand the complexity of the notion of democracy, its many forms and varied meanings.

Second, a problematic view of the world along with a dose of healthy skepticism is richly democratic in process and intent. As we articulate these areas of tension, it is in the best spirit of better understanding society and ourselves, rather than simply pouring salt on wounds and stirring up antagonisms unnecessarily. As Alan Ryan (1995) contends, to have an unproblematic view of the world is not so much to be unconscious as it is to be dead. We choose to live, and that living requires that we center our discourse on tensions and problems. Teacher educators should help teachers develop the patterns of reflective thought that embraces the role of skepticism in scientific and political inquiry.

Third, schools are loosely coupled complex social systems that resist change, too complex to be easily moved in one direction or another and ineffective in changing in precise ways. A corollary to this observation is the indirect and tenuous relationship between institutions of teacher education and public schools. Taken together, we observe that if our collective task is to make schools more democratic, then traditional modes of school change (e.g., teacher in-service) need also to be critically re-examined. Teacher educators, moreover, must further reconsider the inordinate influence of school context to shape those entering the field, described by Kenneth Zeichner (1999) as the "washout effect." As a result, civic teacher education must assist teachers in understanding the core of their decision-making and influences on that cognition and action.

Fourth, democracy is continually constructed "on the fly" within the permeable boundaries of codified law. It is both enriched and impoverished by the tenor of citizen and elected official discourse and the resultant intensity of civic engagement.

Content and Process

Dating back to the origins of social studies as a school-based subject in the early 20th Century, tensions arose about the content/process dichotomy. Scholars in the social sciences and history viewed the schools as an ideal place to share disciplinary knowledge with a wider public and promote their individual fields. More recently in the 1960's advocates of the "new social studies," among them Jerome Bruner and Edwin Fenton, developed curriculum with a strong sense of disciplinarity (i.e., *Man: A Course of Study* as junior anthropology). A strong content orientation is in evidence again, as national and state standards generally employ history, geography, economics, and civics as translations of the field.

Pedagogy discourse also emerged in the early 20th Century, though traces of it date back to Socrates and Plato. John Dewey's laboratory school affiliated with the University of Chicago, for example, was principally directed at developing a science of learning, a goal which eluded Dewey and continues to confound those that follow his pedagogical path (Jackson in Dewey, 1991). Significant efforts were made in the 1930's, for example, to cross the content/process divide, as curriculum was often co-authored by teachers, school administrators, content-area scholars, and professors of pedagogy (Cremin, 1964). Cooperative efforts in curriculum have generally not been sustained until today, however. More often than not, explicit curriculum is developed by school districts in consultation with various groups, such as teachers, textbook publishers,

content-area administrators, and to a lesser degree, scholars of various types, and community members/parents.

The conversation about democratic citizenship and how relevant knowledge, skill, and attitudes should be taught often begins with content/process friction. Presumptions about knowledge are significant within this tension, ranging on a continuum from consumption to creation. To what degree are learners consumers of knowledge that has been rendered complete by another, more knowledgeable person? Or, to what extent are learners engaged in the creation of knowledge? These questions lie at the core of this tension with legitimate arguments on both sides.

In the classroom, it is often difficult to distinguish that which is content from that which is process. When teaching about the war in Iraq, for example, is a student presentation on the Geneva Conventions an example of content or process? From the perspective of the teacher, it seems to be both as the mode of knowledge engagement is of equal value to the knowledge itself. From the perspective of the presenters, it may be that the process is more significant, since they are taking what they know and communicating it to their peers. The point of view of the student audience may be different yet, as they may focus almost exclusively on the knowledge acquisition. Students readily focus on content and not the manner in which it is being conveyed as they have been socialized into a generally passive stance in most classrooms.

Teacher educators should help teachers examine the competing tensions of process and product approaches to teaching and learning and develop a reasoned eclecticism that enables teachers to thoughtfully adjust their decision-making in the continually evolving, complex contexts of schools.

Objectivity and Relativity

Postmodernism is the most significant intellectual hallmark of the contemporary landscape (Hargreaves, 1994). A variety of factors have contributed to the dawning of postmodernism, including the global rejection of colonialism, the concomitant assertion/recreation of identity, the broadening of epistemologies beyond positivism, a sense of malaise, or anomie, related to the accumulation of material wealth, and a socially diffuse sense of skepticism that borders on cynicism. The postmodern era provides an intellectual climate that challenges long-standing implicit assumptions about what is absolute and uncertain in provocative ways.

Conversations about teaching for democracy typically uphold this system as the "ultimate good." The normativity that surrounds democracy discourse generally remains unexamined, though there are some who interrogate the very notion of democratic education. Troy Richardson and Sofia Villenas (2000), for example, examine "democratically induced oppression," or those events that have denied people justice, dignity, and life in the name of democracy. Clearly theirs is a critique of the liberal project that compels one to reconsider the supposed objectivity about which we assert democratic values. Joined by other scholars in multicultural studies, cultural studies, and neo-Marxist frameworks, they question the core assumptions that many take for granted, such as the necessity of human rights as they are currently constituted, notions of epistemology and rationality as traditionally construed, and dimensions of morality in social conduct.

Teacher educators should help teachers understand the philosophical assumptions underlying political and education reforms and the implications for their own pedagogy.

More attempts need to be made to get beyond philosophical analyses to the issues related to the teacher's applied civic education philosophy and its impact on students.

National and Global

Globalization is another emergent phenomenon that presents new challenges to long-standing ideas about teaching for democratic civics. Globalization, or the increasing interdependence of people and societies beyond national borders, again challenges us to rethink the manner in which we educate for democracy. These challenges can roughly be categorized as internal and external. The internal tension addresses the manner in which civics has traditionally been taught, resting exclusively on an examination of institutions and issues bound by the nation in which one is a citizen. The external tension centers on the diverse worldviews about civics and citizenship that are now matters of global discourse. Teacher educators should help teachers examine the competing tensions of process and product approaches to teaching and learning and develop a reasoned eclecticism that enables teachers to thoughtfully adjust their decision-making in the continually evolving, complex contexts of schools.

Developing a reasoned eclecticism and a suggested role for civics teacher educators

The reasoned eclecticism of a teacher (and of course, the teacher educator) that considers the tensions described above differs significantly from the unexamined theorizing and the lack of appreciation of teacher as curricular gatekeeper that is so well documented in the field of social studies and in civic education (e.g, Patrick & Hoge, 1991; Thornton, 1991). Our own notions of a reasoned eclecticism are still developing, but are informed by our own work on teacher theorizing and its practical nature:

> *Teaching is practical work carried out in the socially constructed, complex, and institutionalized world of school, which shapes teachers' actions and gives context*

> *to their meaning. As a result, teachers could not begin to practice without some knowledge of the context of their practice and some ideas about what can and should be done in those circumstances. In this sense, teachers are guided by personal, practical theories that structure their activities and guide them in decision making* (Ross, Cornett, & McCutcheon, 1992, p. 3).

We assert that a variety of studies during the past two decades have clearly illustrated that there is no such thing as a teacher proof curriculum, and that the teacher is indeed the curriculum gatekeeper (Thornton, 1991; Wright, 2000). Therefore, teacher educators should consider that each of their students, whether preservice or inservice, possesses a core set of assumptions, Personal Practical Theories (PPTs) (see figure 1) that guide their planning, interactive decision-making and post-instruction reflections about the interaction of the commonplaces in the civic classroom of teacher, student, subject matter, and milieu (Schwab, 1970).

Insert Figure 1 About Here

If teacher education effects washout to a large extent as Kenneth Zeichner (1999) and others assert, then this may well be because we have failed to systematically provide opportunities for teachers to examine the real tensions of classroom decision making, develop alternative resources for informing the actions that result from this examination, and the habit of assessing the impact of those actions on student learning. Ultimately, we are calling for civic teacher educators to assist teachers in developing their own lifelong reflective platforms that include ongoing analysis of PPTs, and applications in instructional acts such as facilitation of discussions. We provide a brief rationale for this below.

The role of civic teacher education in problematizing the complexity of discussion

Schools and teachers have a significant role in the socialization of youth in a democracy with a lifetime effect on the citizenship of these youth. The core aspect of that role, in addition to the contemporary emphasis on reading and mathematical literacy, is civic literacy.

A significant aspect of that civic literacy is the ability of youth to take part in public discourse about civic issues. Amy Guttman and Dennis Thompson (1996) state that,

> *Deliberation is the most appropriate way for citizens collectively to resolve their moral disagreements not only about policies but also about the process by which policies should be adopted. Deliberation is not only a means to an end, but also a means for deciding what means are morally required to pursue our common ends.* (p. 4)

We believe that our students in the schools are to be regarded as important citizens, not for just for the future, but also for their import now. Their current decisions not only impact their own development and well being, but all of us as well.

We note that deliberation about democracy has both implicit and explicit dimensions. We concentrate here on the explicit, of which discussion in the classroom is an instructional artifact.

Stephen Preskill (1997) suggests the importance of this artifact of civic education. He states that,

> *Open, thoughtful, and highly participatory conversation is a critical feature of democratic society. If the promise of democracy as a school for citizens is finally to be realized, then educators must provide frequent opportunities for students to exchange ideas in a variety of settings with diverse groups of participants. Discussion, deliberation, and individual and group decision making are not only at the heart of participatory democracy, they are an important source of learning and a key to self-development and continuous growth.* (p. 317).

However, facilitating that discussion, deliberation and decision-making is a messy enterprise (Fickel, 2000). How teachers facilitate discussion influences what students have the opportunity to learn (e.g.; Kahne, Rodriguez, Smith, & Thiede, 2000). The tension in teacher deliberation and action is illustrative of what Janos Setenyi has described as the uncertain mediator. In the context of contemporary Hungarian civic education, he submits that, "The teacher of today is an uncertain mediator: the consensual contents of education have vanished in the air, and the expectations of school users have become diversified." We developed a list of elements that we believe are constantly impacting the decision-making of civic educators, and certainly influenced our teaching decisions as high school teachers. We consider these elements as we facilitate the learning of our preservice and inservice teachers in the most difficult arena of civics curriculum.

Insert Figure 3 About Here

We believe that discussion is vital in social studies classrooms. We also believe that it is misused because teachers are not taught to think about the issues and problems surrounding it in a naturalistic setting. Scholarship has been developed that assists us in understanding discussion (i.e. deliberation for democracy) in some situations (e.g., Hess, 2002); There are multiple methods of discussion that have been suggested in social studies literature. Bruce Larson (1997) has generated five conceptions of discussion based upon his research in social studies classrooms. These include: "Discussion as recitation," "Discussion as teacher-directed conversation," "Discussion as open-ended conversation," "Discussion as posing challenging questions," and "Discussion as guided transfer of knowledge to the world outside the classroom." We find these categories

helpful in preparing teachers to think of alternative methods. More importantly, we suggest that each has an appropriate place in the skill set of civic educators, dependent upon the context of the discussion. As a result of our thoughts while constructing this paper, we generated an adaptation of Larson's categories (see Figure 4). In the case of a highly controversial topic (as judged by the teacher), if a decision is made to discuss the topic, it might be prudent for the teacher to consider a teacher directed discussion as opposed to an open-ended one that might result in tensions beyond the managerial expertise of that teacher.

Insert Figure 4 About Here

We posed an activity for the teacher educators assembled at the Gainesville conference that included the following prompt[1]:

- *You are a teacher educator in a suburban community, and are supervising a preservice teacher in an American government class. The United States has just become engaged in war with Iraq, and there was an incident of a potential hate crime within the school where Muslim students' lockers were defaced the day after*

[1] We discarded a visual of an African-American POW televised on *Al Jazerra* during the first week of the war in Iraq. We had reflected on our own teaching experiences as we constructed this activity. We had previously discarded a visual opening activity that showed a picture of an African-American POW televised on *Al Jazerra* during the first week of the war in Iraq. Might the graphic prove to emotional for our participants? Was our attempt to illustrate the issue of national vs. global media behavior and the notion of freedom of the press important enough, or clearly defined for our purposes. While we were confident in our pedagogical skills to facilitate discussion in general, did we have enough content knowledge to facilitate that type of discussion? After examining the list of participants that we had requested from FLREA, we realized that we only knew a sufficient amount about eight of the participants to forecast possible outcomes at a level of comfort for our own PPTs. Was this example's temporal currency appropriate for this conference? Was the fact that we had obtained the picture from a national media web site problematic, especially since we had not viewed the actual broadcast on *al- Jazerra*? Would the backgrounds of our colleagues and the differences in those backgrounds in terms of ethnicity, gender, civic content knowledge, and classroom experience make this example an effective one for problematizing civic education deliberation and discussion? We asked a colleague who was a retired air force administrator with a doctorate in education if this example was appropriate from a veteran's point of view. He had been prepared in the detailed analysis of his own PPTs as a graduate student, and after several moments of silent reflection, he said, "This is a great example, since it shows your own deliberation. I would use it." One week later we decided for a number of reasons (including our own lack of knowledge about the context of the event, saturation with countless other visual images of the war, and our concern for a perception that we might be using the visual for dramatic effect), that this example should be discarded from the session, but kept in this paper as an artifact of our own pedagogical theorizing.

hostilities began. In this context, the intern has asked you for guidance on how to proceed with the current government curriculum on the First Amendment.

We made the instructional decision to show the prompt, provide a few minutes for individual journaling of participant reactions followed by small group discussion, and large group debriefing. It was our instructional goal to illustrate the richness and tensions in the facilitation of a discussion that had possibilities linked to potential hate crimes in a current setting. We also made the decision to discuss at length these deliberations and our last minute thoughts prior to our presentation. We elected to do this following the social the first evening, in part because of our own frenetic schedules (temporal limits to planning) prior to the conference, and also as an example of our typical reflections that continue until we reach the instruction stage with our students in methods classes, and previously in our high school classrooms. The messiness of our deliberations, the uncertain nature of our mediation, and the limits placed on each by our limitations of knowledge, skill, and time, hopefully will serve as an example for civic educators of the richness and tension inherent in the role of civic educators.

Summary

We suggest that all civic educators, including teacher educators, are uncertain mediators, and that problematic mediation should be celebrated and supported by continuing education focused upon that deliberation. An important role of the civic teacher educator is to celebrate the tensions that are uncovered by formal examination of content and process, objectivism and relativism, and national and global. We hope that this paper has generated tension in our audience about the interaction of the commonplaces of civic education, made each participant problematize anew their

individual decision-making, and contribute to the important discourse about the messiness of doing democracy in our classrooms.

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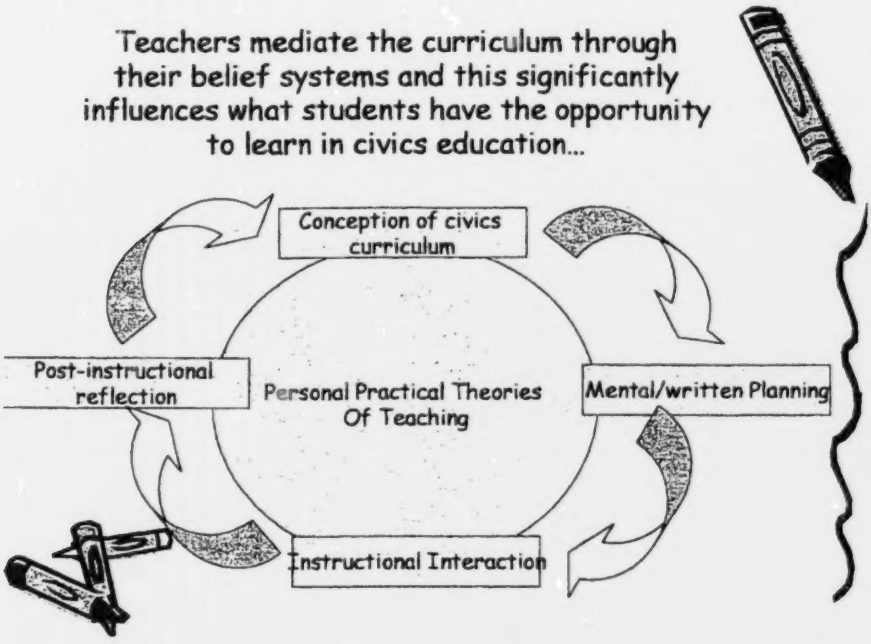
Teachers mediate the curriculum through their belief systems and this significantly influences what students have the opportunity to learn in civics education...
Conception of civics curriculum
Mental/written Planning
Instructional Interaction
Post-instructional reflection
Personal Practical Theories Of Teaching

Figure 1: PPTs and their role in uncertain mediation. Adapted from Cornett, 1990.

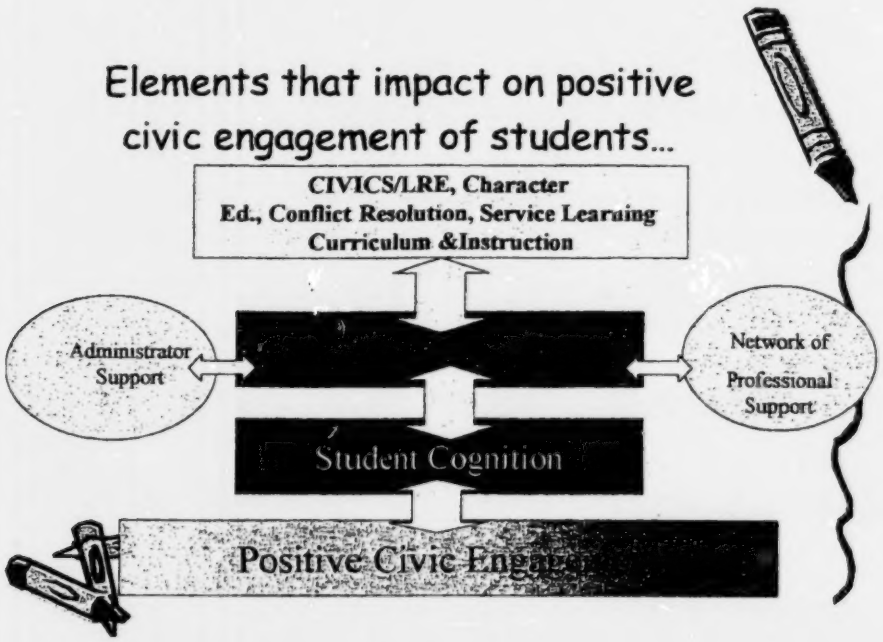
Elements that impact on positive civic engagement of students...
CIVICS/LRE, Character Ed., Conflict Resolution, Service Learning Curriculum &Instruction
Administrator Support
Network of Professional Support
Student Cognition
Positive Civic Engag

Figure 2: Curricular elements that impact on positive civic engagement of students. (See Cornett, 2000, for a more comprehensive discussion of this figure).

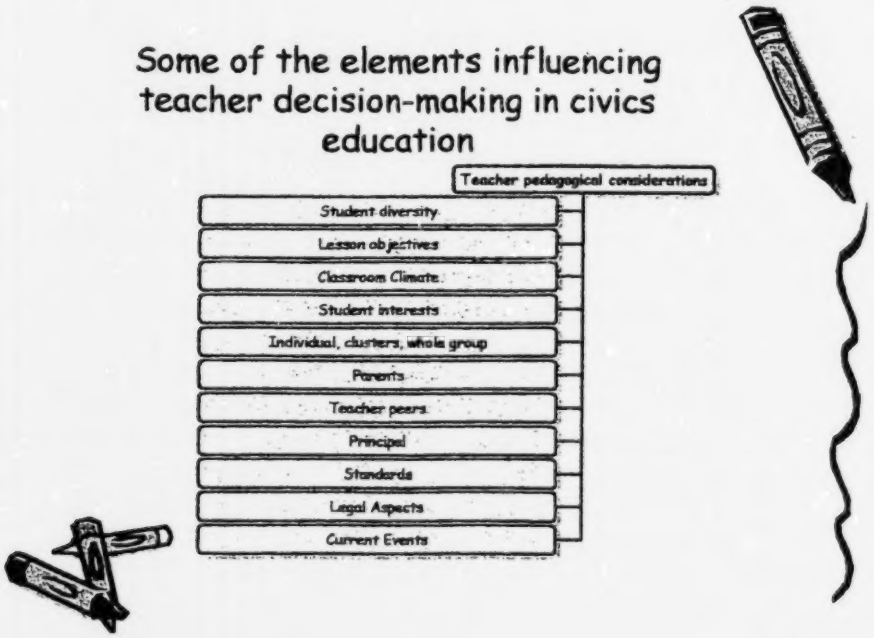

Figure 3: Some elements that influence teacher decision-making in the civics classroom.

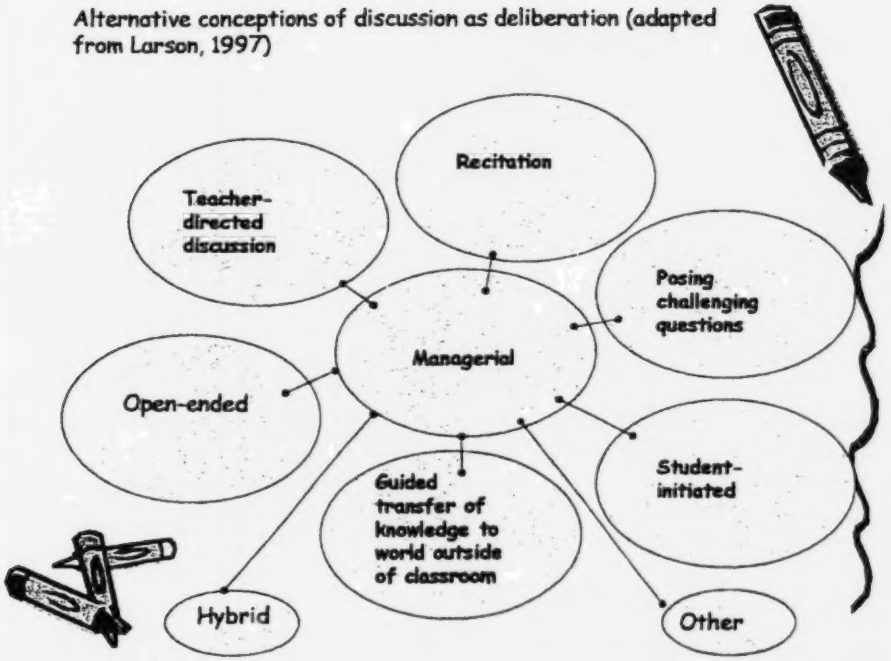

Figure 4: Alternative methods of discussion.

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EFF-088 (Rev. 2/2001)